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AUTHOR Torres, Eliseo
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ABSTRACT

"Curanderismo," or folk healing is seen as an important part of Mexican and Mexican-American culture, and continues to have significant influence in South Texas. A teaching unit, as well as lectures and various publications on curanderismo have been developed, based on research and interviews with practitioners. The practice of curanderismo involves rituals and, often, the use of herbs to heal patients. Curanderismo functions on three often interrelated levels: the material, spiritual, and mental; and the curandero or curandera (healer) may specialize in a particular type of remedy. Belief in curanderismo is both a religious belief and a belief in the supernatural. Healing abilities are often seen as endowed by God, or the result of a long apprenticeship. Curanderos base their livelihood on their healing abilities, and are usually employed for more serious cases. At present, health care professionals are urged to recognize curanderismo as an alternative or supplement to formal medicine. (AS)

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A Teaching Module on Culture

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"Yerbas Medicinales
y Curanderismo" - A Teaching
Module on Culture

"Curanderismo" is Still Alive in
South Texas

Even as a child growing up in the small South Texas community of Taft, I was fascinated by the practice of "curanderismo" or folk healing. I vividly remember the ritual to cure "mal de ojo" - the evil eye - with its prayers and the use of the egg. There were many times that I would experience a bad fright and suffer from "susto" and have to be cleansed with a broom or "ruda" (the herb rue). Still, though I grew up with it, it is difficult to explain, not so much the rituals of "curanderismo," but the love and the faith associated with it.

Nonetheless, I wanted to try. I felt it was very important to keep "curanderismo" alive, and also to acquaint the general public with its importance in the Mexican and Mexican-American culture. I began to do this while I was still a doctoral student at Texas A&I University in Kingsville.

At first I concentrated on the herbs. It was natural to begin

here, remembering as I did that for every illness and with every ritual there would always be a freshly brewed cup of tea: perhaps "manzanilla," "chamomile," mint, or "yerba buena," or "anis" (anise). During visits to relatives or friends, cuttings of different varieties of plants that were used to make the teas were always given to my mother who quickly got them into the earth once we got home!

With this in mind, I developed a teaching unit for classroom teachers on Folk Medicine and Medicinal Herbs of South Texas and Northern Mexico. I interviewed several "curanderos" - folk healers - and "yerberos" - herbalists - in Mexican towns and in towns in the Rio Grande Valley and along the border in the United States. After that, I gave many lectures, in person and on television, about the subject.

It became clear that interest in curanderismo was high, and yet available works on the subject - particularly works aimed at the average person rather than the sociologist or scholar - were few and far between. I felt I had to expand my lecture notes into something more substantial to fill this need.

So it was that my first book, Green Medicine: Traditional Mexican-American Herbal Remedies, came into being. From there, it seemed only natural to go on to describe the practices surrounding the use of those herbs - the same rituals that I recall from my childhood. Thus, I was led to prepare the companion volume, The Folk Healer.

I am often asked how I became interested in curanderismo. First, because it is an integral part of Mexican tradition and culture, I am interested in it. As the older generations pass on, these

traditions tend to be forgotten, and it is important to preserve them. Second, curanderismo is fascinating in itself. Many of the practices are based on scientific fact, while others are a clear demonstration of the powers of faith and belief.

The term "curanderismo" may be translated "folk healing." A "curandero" or "curandera," then, is a healer with the letter at the end of the word signifying whether male or female. All three words derive from the Spanish verb "curar," which means "to heal."

The roots of "curanderismo" are many. The Moors, for instance, brought in Arabic elements, which came to the New World via Spain. The theory of "the humors," with its emphasis on balance between light and darkness, heat and cold, was introduced this way. Some beliefs associated with "curanderismo," particularly the insistence that all power to heal comes from God, are Biblical and therefore

Judeo-Christian in origin. And, of course, there are powerful Indian - particularly Aztec - influences, too, most often in the herbal remedies that are used.

"Curanderismo" has always embraced three levels, though certain curanderos may choose to emphasize one above or even to the exclusion of the others. These are the material (the most common, with its emphasis on objects such as candles, oils, herbs), the spiritual (here the "curandero" is often a medium), and the mental (psychic healers, for example). Rituals - formulaic or patterned ways of treating the various illnesses of those who come to see the "curandero" - are present on all three levels.

It is the state of consciousness that distinguishes the curandero working on the material level: He is awake rather than in a trance and is himself- that is, has not assumed the being of another.

"Curanderos" also have specialties. A "yerbero" will be an herbalist, able to prescribe botanical remedies. A "partera" is a midwife. A "sobador" or "sobadora" will be a masseuse or masseur. That the three levels touch and cross each other can easily be seen when we use the "sobador" as an example.

A "sobador" might well work only on the material level, using his hands and perhaps an aromatic oil or a poultice or even a tea. But a "sobador" might also heal even an ill that exists deep beneath the surface of the skin - indeed, perhaps in the nervous system or in the mind. That "sobador" might be said to operate on the psychic level as well. There are "sobadores," for instance, who have been said to cure paralysis.

Is belief in "curanderismo" a religious belief, or is it a belief in the supernatural? Well, it is often both. The aforementioned belief that all healing power comes from God makes it religious, as does

the very prevalent idea that a "curandero" can only bring about God's will. The belief that certain rituals or practices can effect a certain outcome is, however, a belief in the supernatural - that is, a belief that outside forces can be changed, controlled. In this way, curanderismo partakes of both the religious and the supernatural. In fact, a "curandero" can be a "brujo" - a witch - capable of casting evil spells! Curanderismo, therefore, is careful to distinguish between white magic and black magic, with most "curanderos" espousing the former.

How does one become a "curandero"? Often - as you will see when you read the stories of the most famous healers - it is a matter of recognizing that one has the God-given gift - the "don," as it is called. Sometimes, too, it is the result of a long apprenticeship.

Many "curanderos" renounce steady jobs in order to work as healers.

In defining who is and who isn't a "curandero," the amount of time one spends healing is usually considered. While most cities and barrios within cities have someone whom they call upon to prescribe teas and other herbal remedies for minor ills, the "curandero" is one to whom one brings more serious cases. The "curandero" does not have another job; healing is the basis of the "curandero's" livelihood.

In the past, another consideration when measuring the authenticity of a given person's claim to being a "curandero" was whether or not that person charged for his services. The true "curandero" was said to take what had been offered, and there are many recorded instances, too, of "curanderos" refusing to accept even small payments when these were offered by the very poor.

A famous Texas "curandero" was Don Pedrito, a folk doctor, faith healer, if you will, practicing curanderismo. He lived and worked on a ranch called Los Olmos just south of Falfurrias, Texas. He often traveled from Corpus Christi to Laredo visiting the sick and offering remedies and prescriptions.

Don Pedrito never claimed supernatural powers. He viewed himself as an instrument of God and prescribed simple remedies, such as drinking or bathing in plain water or the application of mud. His explanation: "Your faith will cure you." Literally thousands of followers came to Los Olmos Ranch to seek Don Pedrito's advice and remedies. He did not charge for his services. His grave, near Falfurrias, is a shrine visited even today by thousands asking for his help. Don Pedrito's tombstone describes his contribution to the people of South Texas by calling him "The Benefactor of Humanity."

It could be fair to state that curanderos and curanderismo still have a significant influence on a very large segment of the population in South Texas.

What is formal medicine's attitude toward "curanderismo"? Well, as you might guess, "curanderismo" was long regarded as superstitution or medicine which, at best, treated only imagined ills. Now, however, the medical establishment has become more tolerant. The holistic movement of medicine has done much to promote - for the most part, inadvertently - acceptance of this ancient system. In any case, a lot of writing about "curanderismo" is addressed to health care professionals and urges them to think of "curanderismo" as either an alternative or a supplement to formal medicine.

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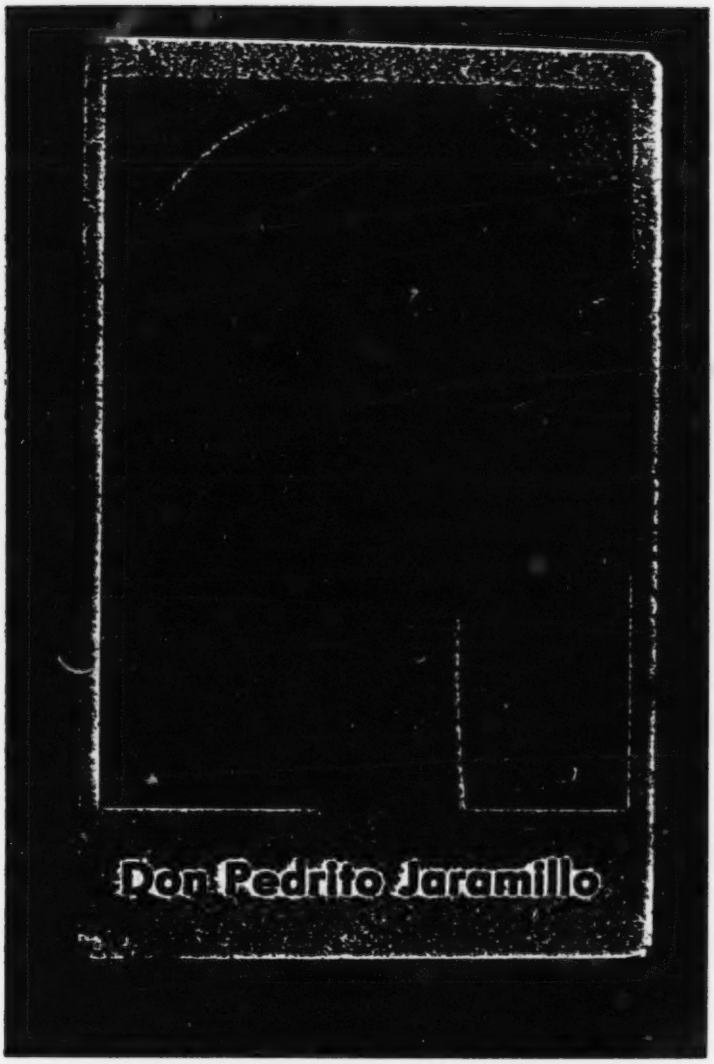
Dr. Eliseo Torres has lectured widely to audiences and a variety of groups around the country on herbal remedies and on curanderismo. He has researched these topics extensively, both in South Texas and in Mexico. A native of Texas, Dr. Torres is Vice-President for Student Affairs at Texas A&I University.



Don Pedrito's tombstone outside of Falfurrias, Texas, calls him "The Benefactor of Humanity."